

Is there any meaning behind failure? Can there really be any reason that can bring sense to suffering? The answer is, "Yes, there can be sense and meaning in suffering and failure. I have learned some powerful lessons from failure...learned a few this past week but, you won't see me line up to receive suffering or to volunteer for failure any time soon. Take these very interesting stories of failure. The greatest prize for wartime failure and the prize for the most useless weapon of all times goes to the Soviet Union. They invented the "dog mine." The plan was to train dogs to associate food with the undersides of tanks, in the hope that they would run hungrily beneath advancing Panzer divisions. Bombs were then strapped to the dog's backs and then would be detonated when they ran beneath the advancing German Army. Unfortunately, the dogs associated food solely with the Russian tanks with which they were trained. The dogs with bombs on their backs forced an entire Soviet division to retreat. The plan began with the first day of the Russian involvement in World War II. It was abandoned on day number two of Russian involvement in WW II.

The worst hijacking failure of all time occurred in 1976 on a flight from Los Angeles California to Detroit Michigan. We shall never know the identity of the man who in June of 1976 who on this particular flight from L.A. to Detroit went to the flight attendants station and said that he had a gun and told a stewardess "Take me to Detroit," "We're already going to Detroit," she replied. "Oh... good," he said, and returned to his seat. Apparently, the stewardess felt so sorry for this hapless hijacker that she did not report the

incident until later in the day after the passenger had left the terminal in Detroit and she reported that she could not recollect which seat the man had been sitting in.

The following story of repeated failure in a bank robbery comes from the book by Stephen Pile entitled, *“The British Book of Heroic Failures.”* In August 1975 three men were on their way in to rob the Royal Bank of Scotland at Rothesay, when they got stuck in the revolving doors. They had to be helped free by the staff and, after thanking everyone, sheepishly left the building. A few minutes later they returned and announced their intention of robbing the bank, but none of the staff believed them. When they demanded 5,000 pounds in cash, the head cashier laughed at them, convinced that it was a practical joke. Then one of the men jumped over the counter, sprained his ankle and fell to the floor in agony. The other two tried to make their getaway, but got trapped in the revolving doors again. All three spent twelve years in prison serving a term for terminal ignorance. But, perhaps the funniest and saddest story of failure is a story that occurred in 1978 during a fireman’s strike in England. It made possible one of the greatest animal rescue attempts of all time. It also tops the list of all time events in which failure was snatched from the mouth of success. Valiantly, because of the fireman’s strike, the British Army had taken over emergency firefighting. On Jan 14, they were called out by an elderly lady in South London to rescue her cat. They arrived with impressive haste, very cleverly and carefully rescued the cat, and started to drive away. But the lady was so grateful she invited the squad of heroes in for tea. Driving off later with fond farewells and warm waving of arms, they ran over the lady’s cat and killed it.

All of us can look back on our lives and remember failures that we have experienced. None of us have run over any cats that we rescued minutes ago or sprained an ankle in a bank robbery after getting stuck in a revolving door. But, we all know failure. Maybe you set out at the beginning of the year to lose a few pounds – take a few inches off your waist. From the looks of things, many of you failed. Some people have tried to salvage a marriage and failed. Other people have tried to get a better job, learn a new skill, get rid of a bad habit, establish some new patterns, make a killing on the stock market . . . and failed. There are times that no matter how hard you try and no matter how much you pray, things just don't turn out the way that you would have liked them to.

What do you do when you fail? No one likes to fail. We avoid it as much as possible. How do you respond to failure? Do you get mad, blame other people, get depressed, quit trying? Equally important questions are, “How does God respond to our failures?” and two, “How should we respond to our failures?” That last question is one that Moses answers in Deut. 30. Let's read verses 1-10.

¹ When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, ² and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, ³ then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. ⁴ Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back. ⁵ He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will

take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. ⁶ The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live. ⁷ The LORD your God will put all these curses on your enemies who hate and persecute you. ⁸ You will again obey the LORD and follow all his commands I am giving you today. ⁹ Then the LORD your God will make you most prosperous in all the work of your hands and in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your land. The LORD will again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as he delighted in your fathers, ¹⁰ if you obey the LORD your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

It is evident in verses 1 and 2 that **God knows that we are going to fail.** God knew that the history of Israel had been and would be marked by failure! Most all of you have had a job at some time or another. When you applied for that job, you had to list references and former employers on your application or resume. What your new employer was trying to do was to establish a history for you. They want to know what kind of a worker you are. They want to know if you fulfill your obligations, if you show up on time, if you get along with other employees, and if you stick it out for the long haul. They want to know if you listen to and respond well to authority. Imagine if you were God and you were checking out the references – the history of Israel – trying to decide if this was going to be a worthy people or not. As you checked out their references, you discovered that they were complainers. You discovered that when things weren't going according to their plan, they

took matters into their own hands. You found out that when life got rough, and the pay check didn't come as quickly as they thought or too much federal tax and something called F.I.C.A. was withheld from their paycheck, they had been known to take up rocks to kill former employers. Would you want them to represent you on earth as your chosen people? I don't think so! And, lucky for you and the rest of the world, I'm not God.

In chapter 29, God invited Israel to enter into a covenant – a contract – with Him. He wanted them as His people. He promised to be their God. Did God know what He was getting Himself into? Was He like many an employer fooled during the interview process only to be badly burned later on? No, God knew exactly what He was getting Himself into. God knows the character of people, we fail and we sin. When God told Adam and Eve not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, He knew that they were going to do it anyway. But almost unbelievable and yet undeniably it is failures, whom God seeks. Jesus said that He didn't come for the righteous but for failures. He said, "I came to seek and to save that which was lost." A lost person is a person who failed to follow directions. God knows the character of man – sinner, failure, weak – and yet He desires us for Himself. God knows you – You can never catch God by surprise.

Now also note, He's not happy about your failure. He doesn't excuse our failure and He's not willing to leave you in failure either. How are you going to respond to the knowledge that others are going to fail you? Men and women respond to the failure of marriage by choosing to not even try and make marriage work but choose instead to either live together or live a wild life of short term relationships

Parents could respond to the failure of their children by locking their daughters in their

rooms until they're 35 and refusing to give their sons the car keys until they have children of their own. Leaders can respond to the failure of their followers by just choosing to do everything themselves. Church-goers respond to the failure of their pastors and fellow church-goers by hopping from church to church and eventually hopping out of church all together. People respond to the failure of other people by curling up in a little ball, closing in on themselves, and shutting the world out. "Better not to try than to try and fail." or so the thinking goes. Shakespeare disagrees, he said, "Better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all."

Have you ever heard of a flea circus? Little fleas can be trained to do things similar to large circus animals and, when reduced to small sizes, provide the viewer with many laughs. However, there's something interesting about how these fleas are trained. If you place a few fleas inside a jar and screw a lid on top, the fleas will instantly try to escape. They will jump up a dozen times or so and hit themselves against the lid. In a moment, however, they are able to gauge the lid's range. In all subsequent jumps they will leap almost to the lid, but not actually ram themselves against it. Thereafter, an amazing thing can be done. The lid from the jar can be removed completely, yet the fleas will continue to jump only as high as the lid used to be. They are convinced, after having hit themselves against the former lid that they are limited in the height they may ever reach. This is similar to people who have experienced a few failures in life, and, thereafter, have decided they are incapable of even reaching the success heights they once attained. Like the fleas, they reduced their goals to a lower and safer level; but, also like the fleas, they remain trapped and bottled. It is better for us to be like a mechanical mouse: when the mouse

bumps into an obstacle, it turns and immediately heads in a new direction. Eventually, it reaches its ultimate goal. You can too if you keep your vision on your target. Someone has said that “Failure is not stumbling and falling. It’s staying on the floor.” Someone else has also said, “Failure should be our teacher, not our undertaker.” So God is never surprised by our failure.

And secondly, God can bring you back from wherever you have fallen. Whenever we fail, it produces a wonderful thing called “guilt”. In my opinion Guilt is always eventually unbearable. So we will try all kinds of ways to get rid of that guilt. We’ll try being good, giving money, doing acts of service – anything that will get rid of the guilt that is about to drive us to a nervous breakdown. In 1987 a new product appeared in the marketplace called "Disposable Guilt Bags. It consisted of a set of ten ordinary brown bags on which were printed the following instructions: "Place the bag securely over your mouth, take a deep breath and blow all your guilt out, then dispose of the bag immediately." The Associated Press reported that 2500 kits quickly sold at \$2.50 per kit. If only we could dispose of our guilt so easily. There is nothing on this earth powerful enough in itself to dispose of our guilt. We cannot fix ourselves, which is what many of us are trying to do. That which makes it possible to be forgiven, to be cleansed, to be healed, that which makes it possible for us to receive our life back again, fresh and clean and new, is the power of God’s Grace in the Cross of Jesus Christ. Not only can God can bring you back from wherever you have fallen but, verse 5 tells us something wonderful about how God responds to our failure.

God can restore all that you have lost. If you come to God and ask His forgiveness, He may or may not restore your marriage. He may or may not restore your job. He may or may not restore your relationship with your kids. But He will restore you and your place with Him. He can make it so that you will not fail in the same way that you failed in the past that made those relationships go bad, to begin with. He ultimately gives us some things that are much greater including a place of belonging, Joy, that's what he did for King David, "Restore to me the joy of my salvation." David had been immobilized by the failures of adultery, theft, lying and murder. God restored joy, a clear conscience and peace. However, we must be willing to expose those failures, bring them into the light of day in order for God to bring us back from where we have fallen and restore what we have lost. What we most often do is flaunt our successes, and hide our failures. A golfer was out on the #1 hole and he was up to red tee, getting ready to swing at his ball and the PA announcer said, "Would the man at the red tee please step back to the white tee!" The golfer stepped back from his ball, kinda looked around, stepped back up, started to swing again and the PA announcer said, "Would the man at the red tee please step back to the white tee!" This time he said, "The red tees are for women only." The man stepped back, looked around, stepped back up to the ball again, and by this time the announcer was getting exasperated, "Would somebody please tell the man at the red tee to please step back to the white tee! The red tees are for the ladies only!" Finally the golfer, in exasperation shouted back, "Would someone please tell the announcer that I'm on my second shot?" In the kingdom of God, everybody gets a second shot and regardless of your failures big or small, irksome or devastating you need to step up to the ball and take your

second shot no matter who is telling you to stop or quit. God is asking you to step up and swing away.

Perhaps the best illustration of what God can do through our failure is the story of Chuck Colson. You remember Colson. He was Nixon's hatchet-man during Watergate. He was a man at the top politically — who eventually went to prison and lost everything. But while in prison, Chuck met the Lord. And today he leads the most effective prison outreach ministries in all of history. In his book, *Loving God*, Chuck writes:

"As I sat on the platform, waiting my turn at the pulpit, my mind began to drift back in time... to scholarships and honors earned, cases argued and won, great decisions made from lofty government offices. My life had been the perfect success story, the great American dream fulfilled. But all at once I realized that it was NOT my success God had used to enable me to help those in this prison, or in hundreds of others just like it. My life of success was not what made this morning so glorious — all my achievements meant nothing in God's economy. No, the real legacy of my life was my biggest failure — **THAT I WAS AN EX-CONVICT**. My great humiliation - being sent to prison - was the beginning of God's great use of my life; He chose the one experience in which I could not glory for HIS glory.

Confronted with this staggering truth, I discovered in those few moments in the prison chapel that my world was turned upside down. I understood with a jolt that I had been looking at life backward. But now I could see: only when I lost everything I thought made Chuck Colson a great guy had I found the true self God intended me to be and the true purpose of my life.

It is not what we do that matters, BUT WHAT A SOVEREIGN GOD CHOOSE TO DO THROUGH US. God doesn't want our success; He wants us. He doesn't demand our achievements; He demands our obedience. the kingdom of God is a kingdom of paradox, where through the ugly defeat of a cross, a holy God is utterly glorified. Victory comes through defeat; healing through brokenness; finding self through losing self." When you realize the truth of the gospel those words of Moses stand pretty tall, "He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers.⁶ The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.⁷ The LORD your God will put all these curses on your enemies who hate and persecute you.⁸ You will again obey the LORD and follow all his commands I am giving you today.⁹ Then the LORD your God will make you most prosperous in all the work of your hands and in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your land. The LORD will again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as he delighted in your fathers,¹⁰ if you obey the LORD your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.